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## THE COMPETITIVE CLASSIFICATION OF PRESIDENTIAL POSTMASTERS

BY GEORGE T. KEYES,

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From the time of President Jackson the holding of federal office carried with it an implied obligation to help run the party machine. With an occasional protest, this service came to be taken for granted by the public. In federal, state and municipal service it was open, insolent and dominating. President Hayes issued an advisory protest against it which came to nothing. After the adoption of the civil service act in 1883, this activity continued, although in lessening degree among those inferior officials who were relieved from coercion by being brought under the civil service rules. In 1886, in answer to a public demand, President Cleveland issued his well-known order to limit this activity. It was only another advisory protest, and its enforcement rested in himself and in unsympathizing heads of executive departments. In 1902 President Roosevelt declared the Cleveland "order" to be still in force, but made no change as to the manner of enforcement and it remained only a protest. So far, no president believed that he could make a direct rule and enforce it without causing an opposition which would block the wheels of the government to an unwarranted extent.

In 1907 President Roosevelt took it up in earnest and made a real order. He amended section one of rule I of the civil service rules by adding the following paragraph:

Persons, who by the provisions of these rules are in the competitive classified service, while retaining the right to vote as they please and to express privately their opinions on all political subjects, shall take no active part in political management or in political campaigns.

The enforcement of this rule was thrown upon the Civil Service Commission, and the commission has performed its duty. The order is an epoch in civil service reform. The competitive classified service now embraces 292,296 places, and the holders of these places are confined to the quiet and efficient performance of

their public duties and are completely absolved from the quasi-feudal allegiance which compelled them to devote time on demand to running primaries and conventions. This is the tremendous victory which civil service reform has won.

The wholesome results of the separation of the competitive service, so great in volume, from politics, furnish the most powerful weapon with which to drive politics out of the unclassified service and to extend the system to state and municipal service. The patronage system cannot stand before the comparison.

The patronage system, and the more emphatically since the recent orders of President Roosevelt and Taft classifying as competitive the fourth-class postmasters, is now confined to a corner of the service. This corner, however, embraces over 100,000 places, some of them having high salaries attached and filled by men of ability, thoroughly skilled in political manipulation. With few exceptions, they hold their places on the recommendation of some politician, a senator, or a congressman of the dominant party, and in states where the party is not dominant, party committees, and private citizens commonly known as referees, make the recommendations. By whomever recommended, the office-holder feels a duty to his patron, and on demand will work days and nights in his interest. As the higher salaried offices are filled through appointment "by and with the advice and consent of the Senate," they cannot be classified under the civil service act of 1883 "unless by direction of the Senate."

In the main the federal service seems to be conducted with considerable efficiency, yet this practice violates every business principle. Except in the departments at Washington and a few other places, the larger offices in the unclassified service might be left vacant and the service would be as efficiently performed as now. The average United States marshal, the average postmaster of the larger cities, the average collector of customs, the average surveyor, the average collector of internal revenue, performs comparatively little service for the government. On its business side the employment of these officers is wastefulness and extravagance. The head of a considerable office should be the master mind of that office, thoroughly skilled, devoted to his duties, and his impulse should be felt in every part of the business. As a rule, he knows

little of the business. If it were not for the members of the classified service under him, he would be a helpless and useless hulk.

The first object sought by all workers in politics, whether office-holders or not, is the control of the party organization, the precinct and ward men and the county, city and state committees. The work required is in such bad repute that most citizens will not engage in it, and the structure represents the efforts of about 15 per cent of the party. Primaries and conventions are held upon the call of these committees. With rare exceptions, wherever there is a contest, cut-throat law applies. In any meeting the chairman may, and often does, decide that twenty is a majority over forty, although he is deafened by the vociferating forty. Repeaters, non-residents, insane men and dead men may be voted. The ballot box may be stuffed. A small minority may and do hold another meeting and elect delegates to a convention. At the convention the committee on credentials rarely decides upon the merits. It lets in the set of delegates the majority of the committee wants in the convention. These are well established rules in politics, and every worker in politics understands that he plays the game accordingly.

This is the kind of politics that the unclassified branch of federal office-holders engage in.

At the present time there is a political army of 9,000 presidential postmasters to be used by the President to aid him in securing legislation.

Is not the present system a form of bribery? A great American once said that to buy votes with your own money out of your own pocket was evil and demoralizing; in fact, in plain language, it is a crime known as bribery, but that to buy votes by gifts of public office was even more despicable because the purchase was made with other people's property, or, in other words, with the property of all the people appropriated by an individual or a party. I do not pretend to quote his words, but that was their substance and in that statement he put the argument for civil service reform in the strongest possible way. It deals with bribery, bribery made worse by the fact that the bribe offered does not belong to the briber and does belong to someone else.

Let us look the facts in the face. These appointments of postmasters are, under the rule of the courtesy of the Senate, with

rare exceptions, made for political reason. Political appointments under the "courtesy" rule became a matter of routine.

When these appointments are made in a campaign year, they come to have a peculiar signification. Frankly political, however much of a custom they may be, they can hardly fail to have an influence on local political conditions.

The controversy over the New York City post office throws a strong light upon the evils of the present system. Mr. Morgan has served two terms and President Wilson was asked to reappoint him by the business interests of the city. It is understood, however, that the President has been prepared to select a political soldier of fortune interested in public office solely as a base for the distribution of spoils.

It does not seem possible that the American people will long tolerate a condition which makes inevitable such an unseemly demand upon the President for spoils—a demand, too, made at a time when the President should be free to give his entire attention to matters of state of the gravest importance.

It seems plain that the time has come to take the post offices of this country out of politics and prevent a repetition of the Johnson appointment. The present system allows the business of the nation, the legislation of Congress, the duties of the departments, all to be subordinated to the distribution of patronage. The great officers of the government are constrained to become mere office brokers. Thousands of these postmasters remain outside the scope of the merit system. In Democratic states these patronage appointees are the political agents of their Congressional sponsors; in Republican states they are the political agents of the administration in power.

The present system is a medieval inheritance and commercial bodies and civic organizations ought to coöperate with the League to secure legislation providing for the competitive classification of first, second and third class postmasters. Will not public opinion demand the termination of such a situation?

The National Civil Service Reform League, by a resolution of its council, has entered upon a campaign for legislation which will provide for the competitive classification of first, second and third class postmasters.

The legislation needed to establish the merit system for these

post offices must, first, repeal the present provisions of the law setting a term of four years for these postmasters, and, second, either provide directly that for an appointment the advice and consent of the Senate shall no longer be required or that such advice and consent shall not be required when the President shall have classified postmasters of these classes. The tenure of office requirement has no place in the merit system, since it subjects the offices to possible, if not probable, change at the end of each term. The advice and consent of the Senate in such appointments is plainly inconsistent with an appointment from a competitive list.

The League's reasons for urging this legislation are briefly as follows:

1. These offices have nothing to do with the determination of policies. Postmasters are subordinates of the Postmaster-General and are no more than subordinate officials in charge of the business management of their respective offices. There is no more reason why a Democratic postmaster should be removed on a change in administration to make way for a Republican than that a clerk should be removed for similar reasons.

2. Under the present system all first, second and third class postmasterships are part of the senatorial patronage. Appointments are based not on merit, but on political considerations. A change in administration means a change in the postmastership at or before the expiration of term and the appointment of a new postmaster almost certainly having but the slightest knowledge of the duties of his office.

3. Under the merit system postmasters would be appointed and retained in office without regard to political considerations. Under such a system it would be possible to fill many of the postmasterships through promotion from the clerical force in the post office and in other cases by the promotion of a postmaster from a smaller to a larger office, on a basis of efficiency and competitive promotion examination.

4. The change would result in a material saving to the government. In a message to Congress on April 4, 1912, President Taft stated that there was a loss of at least \$10,000,000 annually because of the present method of appointment to local offices under the departments of the treasury, post office, justice, interior and commerce and labor, due to the fact that "two persons are paid for

doing work that could easily be done by one." He stated further that

if the position of postmaster (first and second classes) were placed in the classified service and these officers were given salaries equal to 20 per cent more than the salaries now given to the assistant postmasters, the latter position being no longer required, there would be a saving in salaries to the government of \$4,512,900. In the case of postmasters at offices of the third class a large annual saving could be made.

These recommendations were based upon the investigations made by the President's Commission on Economy and Efficiency.

5. The classification of these postmasters has been repeatedly recommended, not only by President Taft, as stated above, but by Postmasters-General Burleson and Hitchcock. Postmaster-General Burleson has on a number of occasions declared that he favored the classification of second and third class post offices in order that he might conduct the business of his department in a businesslike fashion. Postmaster-General Hitchcock went even further and urged the classification of first class, as well as second and third class, post offices, saying in his report for 1910:

This action, which is earnestly recommended, would unquestionably result in a still better standard of service. . . . The old practice of making frequent changes for political purposes has a most demoralizing effect and resulted in unwarranted expenditure due to poor management. If their positions were included in the classified service, postmasters could be continued in charge of their offices so long as they performed their duties satisfactorily, and whenever vacancies occurred they could be filled by the promotion of subordinate officers, thus insuring a constant management of men trained in the postal business. Incidentally, inclusion of postmasterships as a part of the classified postal system would furnish a new incentive for good work on the part of subordinates and employees ambitious to reach ultimately the rank of postmasters.